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## Satiric Strain in Manoj Das's *Sharma and Wonderful Lump*: A Postmodernist Analysis

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Manoj Das

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## Abstract

Any enquiry into the place of satire in contemporary literary canon encounters a notable absence. In fact, satire remains as one of the museum genres of the past – despite the obvious evidence that it has become one of the most practiced modes in today's fictional writings. Casting aside the stringent rules advocated by Swift, Fielding, Dryden and Pope, Postmodern satire is marked by exuberant excess and a fine interplay between fantasy and realism. The present paper strives to study Manoj Das's *Sharma and the Wonderful Lump* – an outstanding satire of postmodern Indian writing in English. The story shares that delight in the works of the great masters of the genre. Although the narrative is dotted with more direct critiques of the socio-political sanctity of both Indian and USA, the movement is towards abandoning the mundane materialism for sacrosanct spiritual living.

**Key Words:** satire, postmodernism, individual, social, spiritual

In the postmodern narrative Hutcheon says that “satire is extramural (social, moral) in its ameliorative aim to hold up to ridicule the vices and follies of mankind, with an eye to their correction” (43). Manoj Das's satire is aimed more at the individual than at the society. He emphasizes more on the follies and vices of the individuals than directly on the improvement of society. Exposition and attack are the dual systems in the domain of satire. Das exposes more than he attacks and comments more than he criticizes. His aim is to expose good-humouredly the pretence, hypocrisy, vainglory, pomposity, spiritual sterility, sexuality and the like depravity of people of present era. He ridicules the failing in the individual and limits his ridicule to corrigible faults. The satire *Sharma and the Wonderful Lump* employs fantasy to stress human limitation and to ridicule those who believe they are exempted from those limitations by creating embellished characters to mock real ones. Satire is similar to fantasy in that it is a method of extremes, like Sharma with the wonderful lump and the ridiculous proportions to which it is inflated so as to mock the frivolities made common by everyday appearance. Thus in this satire the writer employs fantastic characters to achieve its critical purposes and fulfills the characteristics of fantasy by taking readers away from physical reality while simultaneously raising fundamental questions and insights into how that reality works, more specifically about society's intellectual and moral shortcomings.

Das's longest story *Sharma and the Wonderful Lump* (45 pages) is a gentle satire on vulgarity, pervasion and false values of modern civilization. It is the story of one Mr Sharma, who is a simple and dutiful clerk in Rooplal Textiles. He has an *aboo* (an Odia word representing the tumour) on his head. He has gone to America for the operation of that lump. The giant lump is considered as “one of the medical wonders of the world” (21). He is applauded as the pride of India. This wonderful lump makes him an international figure. There was a time when Sharma kept himself aloof from people and thought of committing suicide for the *aboo*. But now he is proud for the gigantic lump. The media people run after him. Dr Hardstone instead of

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advising to liquidate the lump tempts him to sell it for material gain. The way Sharma expresses his pleasure makes him a ludicrous figure:

Doctor, have not I placed my 'aboo' at your disposal? You can do with it what you think best. I brought it up with so many attention and care. If it has now grown up enough to earn me a few chips, why should I grudge it? (13).

The doctor by that way too wants his own popularity and material benefit. Sharma's greed and Dr. Hardstone's creed become the instruments of ridicule. After appearing in TV Sharma becomes an international celebrity overnight. The media makes him from a zero to a hero. Money comes profusely. Charmed by the power of money and popularity, Sharma forgets the motto for which he arrives in America. He starts commercial transactions with American TV, "The Holocaust" magazine by giving an interview snapped against the abominable background of a bare-breasted woman and further campaigns for Mr Baldbreast in American election. He is invited to give an exclusive interview in "The Holocaust". Sharma does not miss the opportunity to blow his own trumpet:

The Tulsi exudes its fragrance from its budding ... for your information, that I was destined to be great was obvious to the folks around me no long after I appeared. People saw a Cobra attending on me raising its awful hood on my head when I was barely a week old (12).

Das by using typical Indian sayings, folklore and exaggeration satirizes the ego and self pomposity and brings humorous effect. After the interview while he sets to pose for the snap, he finds Miss Chichi stands at the background without any garments on the upper part of her body. The storyteller satirically exposes the nudity and vulgarity of modern life through Miss Chichi. Sharma shows his reluctance. Mrs Young Husband, the assistant of "The Holocaust" manages to convince him with the valour of her tongue:

Look Mr. Sharma, I mean, please look literally. There is nothing abominable about Miss Chichi. She is fine Arts incarnate. Our editor has framed a wonderful caption for the pleasure as he visualized it. 'The top against the topless', isn't that fantastic? Going to be the scoop of the year, I bet (15).

Excess is one of the marks of the postmodern satire. In Das it is the way in which it breaks the bounds of the realist narrative. Here, an excess of language becomes part of the aesthetics. The storyteller exposes the stupidity of media people and their ways to exploit the sentiment of the mass through eye-catching nude photographs and catchy captions.

Das comes to the politicians and shows how the *aboo* becomes a means to beguiling the voters. His *aboo* is booked with a huge sum and he is invited to campaign for Mr. Baldbreast, the presidential candidate of America. Sharma's response brings humour when he says,

I Know, my participation in the campaign would ensure Mr. Baldbreast's victory. Mr Spider- - - there is no harm in telling you that while a student of tenth class, I stood first in school in the debate on 'Male versus Female' defeating even a pair of speakers belonging to the eleventh class. My *aboo* was then in its greening stage. There is no reason why I should fail to impress the Americans in favour of Mr. Baldbreast now. Ha! Ha! (17)

Mr. Spider, the Asst. Secretary of Mr. Baldbreast laughs at Sharma's foolish and fantastic idea and in a satirical mode says:

Thank you, Mr. Sharma but you will be spared the bother of speech making. We have a thousand tested speakers better acquainted with the peculiarities of the American situation. Besides, yours is what the British call the King's English - rather a remarkable variation of that which the voters of the United States I am afraid, are not qualified enough to follow. When you pronounce Baldbreast, to them it might sound Domdeniel. But you should by all means laugh - just as you did now. That is a universal language as they say (18).

Das comically ridicules the formality and tactful manner of exploitation of modern elites. The storyteller highlights the particularity of representation and interpretation, stating the peculiarity of each character as a construct. The aspects of representation and interpretation form what we may call one of the major postmodernist constituents of satire.

When Sharma is kidnapped by the agents of Domdaniel and threatened to destroy his *aboo* as it helps Baldbreast's ugly plan to ridicule their candidate and affect the election, he finds himself alone in an alien world. The highly afraid Sharma returns India within twenty four hours carrying the load of the giant lump on his head. In India Rooplal makes use of him again for political gain. Finally Sharma is elected to his state assembly as an independent MLA. But before joining to any party the ministry gets collapsed and a by-election is announced. His supporters confide him that the *aboo* may not cast the same spell as it does in the previous election. Hopelessly Sharma wishes his *aboo* to become twice its size in order to draw attention from the public. The writer's mild satire is on democratic system, where the *aboo* symbolically represents a persuading item for beguiling the voters. The pervasive element of social satire in the story presents Das's serious concern at the debasing of moral standards and materialistic outlook which has taken hold of society.

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The storyteller combines situations and characters to produce the best humorous effect. He uses humour purposefully to bring satiric effect. His projection of the follies and vices of the individuals is largely with a purpose to build a sanctified social set-up. It is worthwhile to mention here that “Manoj Das is a social reformer of first order” (Pradhan 1) and an Aurobindonianite who believes in the corrective measures of individuality. His attitude is clearly reflected in his statement:

When I see a lotus blossoming out as filthy a stuff as mud, with the intervention of sunlight, I don't see why a godly race can't emerge out of the present muddy humanity (cited by Pradhan *The Statesman Festival* 2003:27).

Imbued with Sri Aurobindonean vision Das presents in the satiric design the futuristic vision of a better society. His kinship as a satirist is however not Dryden or Pope or Swift but with Fielding. Anand Lall remarks:

Das style is primarily satiric, but not of the vitriolic variety. He exposes the ridiculous side of his characters with a comic flavour that betrays affection rather than the misanthropy that satirists sometimes cultivate. Frequently therefore, one finds a note of sorrow creeping in about what might have been, or an evanescent air of romance” (27).

At the end of the narrative Sharma's mother pleads near his Guru for the good health of his son. The Guru, who through his yogic power makes the *aboo* vanish instantly. The *aboo* is symbolically projected to show the moral degradation and distraction of individuals from the path of social sanctity. Das makes Sharma the butt of the satire. The abominable *aboo* on Sharma's head is an allegory representing incurable materialism of the West. At last when this *aboo* becomes longer than its size, which Sharma cannot bear on his head, Das operates it by giving it a spiritual healing. Thus through the veneer of *aboo* Das brings out the reality of the incurable greed in human beings represented by Sharma himself, Mr Baldbreast, Dr Hardstone, Chichi, and Rooplal. A perfect synthesis is thus established between diseased human condition and its possible cure through spiritualism. With the disappearance of the *aboo* by the grace of his mother's Guru, Sharma is not happy. However his mother is delighted. In the disappearance of the *aboo* she dreams of a future that will give a new lease of life to Sharma without the gigantic *aboo* of darkness and arrogance. Prof. P. Raja comments:

From a natural plane the writer suddenly takes us – without giving us any jolt – to a supernatural plane when the *aboo* disappears through the intervention of a mystic power. The allegory lies perhaps in the author's vision of a transition to a better future that a spiritual awakening alone can bring (92).

Realism descends at the end of the story through the framework of an inbuilt allegory that points towards a spiritual regeneration of Sharma. While Sharma's *aboo* vanishes by the wonder of Almighty, the readers experience a spiritual catharsis shedding their abominable *aboos*.

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